COLLEGE DAYS OF PRESIDENT POLK

His Career at the University of North Carolina During the Formative Period of His Life.

HO now knows or cares to know anything about the personality of James K. Polk or Franklin Pierce? The only thing remarkable about them is that being so commonplace they shoud have climbed so high." James Bryce, in The American Commonwealth, makes this statement in the chapter entitled "Why Great Men Are Not Chosen Presidents." He says further that down to the time of Andrew Jackson, in 1828, the presidents were statesmen, were "men of education, of administrative ability, of a certain largeness of view and dignity of character;" and that from Jackson's time to the Civil War they were soldiers or politicians such as Van Buren, Polk, and Buchanan, who were selected as figure-heads for the Presidential chair. Mr. Bryce said recently, when visiting the University of North Carolina, and when told that Polk attended the University, that the most uninteresting biography he could think of would be a life of James Knox Polk.

It may be that Mr. Polk received no education in college, and no administrative ability in the gubernatorial chair of Tennessee, and no idea even of the meaning of statesmanship while representing Tennessee in the Congress of the United States. His biography may be absolutely uninteresting, and Mr. Bryce's criticism may be just. Who knows?

But these matters are not to be determined in this paper. The purpose of this paper is to offer some additional facts for Mr. Polk's biography. These facts concern his student days, the formative period of his life. And may it not be claimed here, without too much assumption, that the formative period of any man's life is interesting, whether the active period of life afterwards is famous, infamous, or mediocre.

Sources of complete information do not offer themselves readily on the student life of this man, or of any other man indeed, who has long since been dead with all of his fellow students. Some information concerning scholarship is available from the University records; some from the Dialectic Society records concerning society duties. Still other information concerning Polk's private life, might be secured form his letters, if those letters could be produced. But with all of this data, hardly any light would be shed upon a very important activity in his college life. This activity is technically known as the "campus course." The college man will understand immediately the meaning of the term. Those uninitiated in college terms, however, might consider this one jestingly. So it might be well to explain to them, in passing to the data available, what the "campus course" involves.

The "campus course" is that side of college life which is a practical human nature study, and in which the laboratory consists of many types of men. On the campus men meet each other, stop to pass the time of day, to exchange a joke, be jovial; men gather in groups, the groups gather into a united body; a fine spirit, the college spirit, plays in, over, and through them all. Among these men arise practical problems of college life, problems about which men differ and thoughts clash in friendly and honorable debate. And in this difference of opinion the very inner natures and the very principles of the men involved are laid bare. This is the "campus course."

James Knox Polk entered the Sophomore class of the University of North Carolina in the fall of 1815, at the age of nineteen. He graduated at the head of his class in 1818. At his graduation Polk held the highest honors in mathematics and in the classics, and delivered the Latin Salutatory. Throughout his college course his scholarship surpassed that of his classmates. The faculty report of the December examination of 1816 says that Polk and Wm. D. Moseley were the best scholars in the Junior Class. "The whole class is high," concludes the report. In all of his college undertakings, Polk was accurate, and, indeed, brilliant. Although he was called a "dullard president," that term changed to "dullard student" would not apply to his college days.

Polk was accurate not only in his scholastic duties, but in his habits of daily routine. A witty student of that day, who was making an argument, said that his argument was just as true as the fact that Polk would arise in the morning at the first call.

Polk roomed in the South Building with William D. Moseley in Number 18. The room is situated on the third floor, in the southwest corner. A few years after Polk and Moseley left the University William A. Graham occupied the same room. It is a striking coincidence to note that several years later, 1845, these three men were inaugurated to high seats of public service. Polk was elected President of the United States; Graham was elected Governor of North Carolina; and Moseley was elected the first Governor of Florida.

Polk boarded with Mr. Yeargan, who lived a mile north of the University campus on the present Tinney plantation. Yeargan was the first man to establish a grist mill in this section of Orange county. It is safe to assert that the titles of miller and innkeeper marked him as a famous man in his community. The plantation house and mill are torn down now.

In the University Polk was associated with a set of men who were also excellent students, and who took their places with him in after life as leaders. Among some of these men were: John Motley Morehead, Governor of North Carolina; James Turner Morehead, member of Congress; Alfred M. Slade, consul to Buenos Ayres; Edward J. Mallet, consul-general to Italy; William M. Green, bishop of Mississippi and chancellor of the University of the South; William H. Haywood, United States senator; Robert H. Morrision, first president of Davidson College (North Carolina); Thomas B. Slade, president Columbus Female Institute (Georgia); Hamilton C. Jones, Supreme Court reporter, and William D. Moseley, first governor of Florida.

Besides the degree of A. B., Polk received two other degrees from the University. The master's degree, presented for the choice of a profession, was conferred in 1822, four years after his graduation. Polk had entered law in 1819. He was made a doctor of laws in 1847, while president of the United States.

Such are the meager bits of information available from the University records, and from other sources widely scattered, relating to Polk's scholastic work and "campus course." If he had not been a member of the Dialectic Society we could go no further.

On January 25, 1816, at the suggestion of Lawson A. Alexander, Polk was admitted into the membership of the Dialectic Society, a society which still exists, and which from the beginning of the University has, with its sister, the Philanthropic, fostered numbers of political leaders. The society records are preserved and in good condition. The pages are dingy and brown, 'tis true, but the handwriting is legible. The original signature of Polk, made by himself when he joined the society in 1816, is very distinct.

The influence of the Dialectic Society helped to shape the life of Polk in the formative period. There he debated, wrote and officiated. There he secured his first executive training, and laid the foundation for his executive career. There he thought over problems of life and expressed his thoughts in compositions. There he got the oratorical and debative training which enabled him later to win the title in Tennessee of the "Napoleon of the Stump."

Polk's first debate was made March 20, 1816, on the question: "Would it be justifiable in the eyes of the world and agreeable to the laws of nations for the United States to assist Spanish America in defence of their liberty?" Polk led the negative of this question and that side bore away the honors. On April 11, 1826, ten years later lacking thirty-nine days, shortly after he had entered into the duties of his first session in Congress, Mr. Polk offered resolutions and made a speech opposing the attitude and action toward the Panama Mission of President Adams, who had apopinted commissioners from the United States to attend a congress of Spanish American states that had virtually attained their freedom, but were still warring with the mother country, Spain. Mr. Polk contended with many followers that such an action would bring the nation into unfriendly relations with Spain and establish an unfortunate precedent for the future. Just as he had won recognition among his fellow students ten years before on the same side of the same question in a small debating society in North Carolina, so now, still holding the same thought he had worked out then, and perhaps the same argument, he won recognition and respect before the members of the great National Council.

Polk was permitted to withdraw from society duties on April 3. The reason for this is not stated, but presumably it was for the sake of his studies. He did not attend again until the next session. From then on he was a constant attendant and immediately assumed a prominent stand in society business. In those days the societies conjointly owned the library. They were responsible, too, for the demeanor of students who were society members. And whenever library affairs needed construction, or conduct of members needed investigation, or society routine required service, Polk was invariably chosen on the necessary committees.

Polk occupied all the offices of the society. He is the only man known to have been elected twice to the presidential chair.

July 11, 1816, he was appointed with seven others on a committee to direct society affairs, to offer suggestions. July 17 he was elected on the room committee. July 24 he was elected treasurer. At the same meeting he was placed on a committee to "examine into the state of the library, etc." August 7 he was appointed on another committee, the duties of which are not designated. September 6 he was chosen censor morum. This position was responsible for disorder during society meetings. March 12, 1817, he was treasurer again. April 16 he served as secretary in the absence of the regular officer. The minutes of this meeting, written by Polk, are written in a painstaking manner. The letters with very few exceptions, are written separately and distinctly. Polk usually wrote the Spencerian style, without the old-fashioned "s," however. At this meeting he was appointed a committee of one to "choose books in the library to the value of ten dollars in order to have labels put in them with James L. Wortham's name as donor." April 23 Polk was elected corrector. The duty of this officer was to criticise debates and compositions. April 30 he was appointed with two others on a committee to ascertain damage done a library book. May 8 Polk was elected president of the society upon the resignation of Hardly L. Holmes, who had served one meeting. May 20, 1818, he was elected for the second time president, holding the office until he graduated.

Polk was fined several times for irregularity. The nature of this offense is not absolutely known. The suggestion has been made that it meant tardiness. Seven fines of ten cents each were imposed upon him. Once he was fined twenty-five cents for gross irregularity. He was fined twice for absence. The record of March 19, 1817, says: "Hamilton C. Jones was fined ten cents for threatening language to James K. Polk, and Polk the same for replying to Jones." Evidently Polk was quick at retort.

Polk read much and over a wide field while a student. The full list of books loaned from the library to society members while he was in college cannot be found. A catalogue of books belonging to the Dialectic Society shows, however, that he presented several books. These embraced historical, biographical and theological treaties. They are eight volumes of Gibbon's Rome, presented by Polk and J. Simeson unitedly; Williams' France; Memoirs of Darwin; Addison's Evidences; Gospel: Its Own Witness.

In the archives of the Dialectic Society are the second inaugural address and two compositions in Polk's own handwriting. The inaugural address is on "Eloquence." The compositions are on "The Powers of Invention" and "The Admission of Foreigners into Office in the United States." The following extracts are taken at random:

His composition on "The Powers of Invention" begins: "To analyze the human mind with a Locke and to examine the powers of its minute parts fall not within the tyro's province, but to contemplate its rapid stride to eminence belongs equally to the unlettered savage wrapped in security in nature's forest and the polished European who feasts on the dainties of his sumptuous board." Again: "In fine what is the occupation in life in which this faculty may not be exercised? Place man in necessitous circumstances and his busy mind will project schemes of relief which to the mere theorist who had never been placed in a similar situation would appear chimerical. Present to him the alluring prospect of immortality on earth and what a spring is given to every action."

From the composition on "The Admission of Foreigners into Office in the United States," the following extract is given: "So long as virtue is the prominent feature of American jurisprudence the Eagle of liberty will have full scope for his wings. If our republic like unsuspecting innocence has opened the portals of humanity and rendered itself vulnerable to the poisoned darts of a vicious world, it is a more lovely trait in its character than all the splendid equipage of a tyrant's throne on the boasted energy of European legislation."

From his inaugural address "On Eloquence" three extracts are made. He says: "Reflect upon the necessity of cultivating your oratorical powers. You not only live in a country which possesses advantages over every other in the superior excellence of its political institutions and in the freedom of parliamentary debate, but you are the chosen few of your own community, who have the advantage of a liberal education. Thousands by nature as good as you remain the same rude stocks that nature formed them. But you like marble taken from the quarry receive the polish of the skillful artist. You have the advantages of the Dialectic Society, a body similar in its organization and many of its rules of proceedings to our State legislature and to the great national council of our Republic."

In the same address in regard to studies he says: "Experience shows that without study even the greatest natural abilities can never arrive at eminence. It also shows that the fawning sycophant and cringing courtier for promotion, sink in the estimation of the world, and meet that contempt which is due to their character from the truly honorable and upright."

Polk was endowed with a burning ambition, and he expressed it before the Dialectic Society in glowing language. He looked out with confidence to a great career for himself, and for his fellows, too. He must have seen some of the future that fate had reserved for him and for them. Witness the following. It is taken from the same inaugural address: "Seize then with avidity the opportunities of improvement as they pass, for ere long you may be called upon to succeed those who now stand up the representatives of the people, to wield by the thunder of your eloquence the council of a great nation and to retain by your prudent measures that liberty for which our fathers bled. It may be a delusive phantom that plays before my imagination but my reason tells me that it is not. For why may we not expect talents in this seminary in proportion to the number of youths which it fosters, and with the advantages which have been named why may we not expect something more than ordinary? But if it were visionary, I would delight to dwell for a moment upon the pleasing hope."

On the walls of the historic Dialectic Literary Society hangs an oil painting of James Knox Polk, the eleventh president of the United States, sitting in profile. In his hand is a parchment roll, and on the table before him is a white feathered pen staff. The poise of his head, its proportionate development, suggests keen mentality and intellectual gift. In silence, with many others, equal in ability if not in eminence, he presides over the old hall where he so eagerly served his early opportunities.

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NORTH CAROLINA NEGRO POET.

(Wilmington Star.)

There came into this office yesterday a remarkable negro, the son of a Robeson county slave, bearing today in honor the name of his father's "Ole Marster." He was James E. McGirt, once a pickaninny, now a man of letters. McGirt is a poet—not a colored poet, for poets have no race, as musicians are said to have no sex. McGirt, the man, is a negro, neither proud nor ashamed of the fact. McGirt, the poet, is—a poet!

This North Carolinian was born in Robeson county, and went to Greensboro, where he studied at Bennett college. His parents had the African jingle in their veins. They translated it betimes into jingles of their own. McGirt inherited and improved. A subtle poetry of birth he put to use in the poetry of today, in the form of yesterday. He developed the tinkle of bangles into the music of words. But, with rare discernment he put his music into the form of his race.

McGirt has been in a sense "lucky"—in the sense of opportunity. He found friends who had both encouragement and money to offer him. He went to Philadelphia, and he "made good." He has written four volumes of poetry, and two of short stories. It is real poetry, and they are real stories. Chesnutt, who promised much, has a successor who promises even more.

There is something uncanny about the work of a negro poet, for the reason that we have mentioned above, that the dream of the impractical abolitionist finds there—in the work of a real talent—an equality beyond condition. Some of McGirt's poems strike the universal note. The spark that his parents bore, he has fanned into a blaze.

For all that, it is remarkable that this man should have preserved along with a flattering success, a sense of proportion. He is still a "Tar Heel Negro" personally, say what you will about his abilities otherwise. Through his talk runs a strain of half-humorous, half-pathetic reminiscence of humble days. And the beauty of it all is that he so evidently enjoys the memory.

The North has lauded McGirt. It has sung his genius, bought his poems, hailed him as what he is not—an exponent of his race. Intellectually, he is, on the other hand, an exception. What the North does not see—and what the South can appreciate—is that, barring his gift, he is typical of his race. Poet McGirt's present mission is to write of the Southern negro for Northern magazines. We do not doubt, after a casual interview, that he will do so wisely; that he will observe with kindliness, and with that accuracy possible only to sympathy with those of whom he writes. The Ray Stannard Bakers see with an alien eye the surface—McGirt, by reason of his peculiar abilities, ought to be able to see deep. And we know that he "understands."

PROGRESS.

Knicker—Now we have children taught how to play.

Bocker—Fine; next we shall have animal trainers to show lambs how to gambol.